

This article is downloaded from



CRO CSU Research Output
Showcasing CSU Research

<http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au>

It is the paper published as:

Author(s): Redshaw, S.J.

Title: Investigating the lack of social context in car television advertising

Journal: Road and Transport Research: a journal of Australian and New Zealand research and practice

ISSN: 1037-5783

Year: 2014

Pages: 44 - 50

Volume: 23

Issue: 1

Abstract: The paper reports a hitherto-unreported innovative analysis of 97 television commercials for cars appearing in Australia in 2002-2003 to demonstrate a method that could be used to monitor the degree to which car advertising responds to the social environment. Car advertising has previously been analysed according to the qualities of the car and not the social environment in which the vehicle is depicted. Advertising is one of the shaping influences in the social environment that impact on perceptions of the driving context.

URLs:

FT: <http://www.arrb.com.au/Information-services/Publications/Issue.aspx?id=50>

PL: http://primo.unilinc.edu.au/primo_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?vid=CSU2&docId=dtl_csu70775

The lack of social context in car television advertising

Sarah Redshaw

Abstract

The paper reports a hitherto-unreported innovative analysis of 97 television commercials for cars appearing in Australia in 2002–2003 to demonstrate a method that could be used to monitor the degree to which car advertising responds to the social environment. Car advertising has previously been analysed according to the qualities of the car and not the social environment in which the vehicle is depicted. Advertising is one of the shaping influences in the social environment that impact on perceptions of the driving context. Representations of speed and power in car advertising have been considered a negative influence on driving behaviour, though the absence of social context has not been examined.

This paper provides a systematic analysis of the social environment in which car ads targeting young drivers is situated. The majority of ads studied depicted a single vehicle (64%) with a male driver (42%) and no passengers (64%). The driver is depicted in a demonstration of manoeuvring skills; no other skills involved in negotiating traffic are evident. A decade later, although there appear to be more advertisements with a woman driver, advertisements with a male driver with the open road to himself nevertheless seem to persist. The impression that car advertising continues to lack social context – such as pedestrians, passengers and other drivers – is concerning.

The absence of everyday social factors in car advertising, including the dependencies and demands of normal life, traffic, social cooperation and responsibility, thus needs further investigation.

Keywords:

Mass media, gender, content analysis, television advertisements, dominant themes, social environment, driving, prosocial

The lack of social context in car television advertising

INTRODUCTION

The analysis reported in this paper specifically sought to identify dominant characteristics of car advertising that relate to the social environment of the car. The number of cars evident, the gender of the driver and whether any passengers are visible are characteristics of the social environment in that they indicate the kind or level of social representation and engagement depicted in car advertising. Cars are generally driven in complex social situations where other vehicles and people are present. Generally this is an urban environment and rules are required to regulate give and take in the traffic.

Car advertising has previously been analysed according to qualities of the car and not the social environment in which the vehicle is depicted. Performance and sales incentive were found to be the dominant themes in 1998 and the previous decade and a half. Ferguson et al. (2003) analysed the content of 850 car advertisements from the United States, Europe and Asia, and listed the primary themes according to frequency of appearance. Themes analysed included performance, luxury/prestige, comfort/convenience, economy/good value, quality, reliability, durability, safety, engineering, styling and exciting/fun to drive.

The themes identified in Ferguson et al. are concerned with features of the car itself as well as the strategies used in advertising to illustrate performance, luxury and comfort and so on. Other content analyses of car advertising have since shown that themes antagonistic to safety are prevalent in advertising (Schonfeld, 2005; Shin, 2005). A major study of car advertising in Australia used the themes identified by Ferguson et al. to evaluate changes since the introduction of a voluntary code of practice (Sheehan, 2006). Their analysis indicates that both before and after the introduction of the code in 2002 exciting/fun to drive was a major theme in Australian car advertising and incentive/sales represented a much smaller proportion of ads. After the code was introduced incentive/sales became the major theme in the largest percentage of ads.

The analysis outlined here excludes car sales advertisements and focuses on those that show the car on the road and so includes themes such as excitement and fun that were shown to have changed before and after the introduction of the code. The analysis presented here focuses on a new analysis of car advertising that investigates the presence of the social environment in the advertisements.

The concept of the social environment has been employed increasingly in considering technologies and their impact on and relation to human behaviour. In the *American Journal of Public Health* (Barnett, 2001) the following definition was offered:

Human social environments encompass the immediate physical surroundings, social relationships, and cultural milieus within which defined groups of people function and interact.

The contribution of the family as well as peers, societal institutions and norms has been acknowledged as providing models, opportunities and reinforcements for risk-taking behavior (Taubman - Ben-Ari, 2012).

The media as an aspect of the wider context of driving has been acknowledged as an influence on young driver's perceptions of the driving environment (Shope, 2008). Studies that have looked at viewers' perceptions of car advertising have found that risky and unsafe driving practices are perceived in car advertising, particularly speed (Redshaw, 2011; Donovan, 2011; Gardner, 2005; Sofoulis, 2005). It has been acknowledged that advertising 'may promote and encourage speed and unsafe, risk taking behaviours' (Donovan, 2011). Fischer et al. (Fischer, 2011) reviewed studies of association between advertising and risk taking behaviour and provided a meta analysis demonstrating that 'risk-glorification in the media is substantially associated with increases in real-life risk-taking behaviors, risk-positive cognitions and attitudes, and risk-promoting emotions' (385). Advertising rarely contains safety information (Wilson, 2007).

Driving as a social practice (Redshaw, 2008) occurs within a social context of values and norms as well as a system or network of mobility (Sheller, 2000; Urry, 2004). Advertising has become part of the normal background of everyday practice shaping norms and impacting on behaviour in that it gives expression to dominant images and articulations of the car (Redshaw, 2007). Shope (2006) identifies a number of factors impacting on the driving of young people but does not include aspects of the social environment such as media or advertising.

The media, including television advertising, have a role in educating consumers and encouraging desires such as those related to the car (Schorman, 2010). Car advertising has helped to frame cars as serving meaningful purposes beyond a form of transport by drawing on and extending symbolic meanings such as desire for an image and for prestige (Steg, 2004). Manufacturers have developed models for different needs and social representations according to perceived market desires (Donovan, 2011).

The aim of this paper is to report one attempt to identify the social context reflected in car advertising. It provides a base upon which future investigations might be able to test whether or not the representation of everyday social factors in car advertising, including the dependencies and demands of normal life, traffic, social cooperation and responsibility, has changed.

METHOD

As part of the ARC funded project Transforming Drivers, in partnership with NRMA (Motoring and Services) conducted from 2003 to 2006, 97 television advertisements for cars were analysed. Copies of ads appearing on television in New South Wales in 2000-2003 were obtained from the company AdTrak (later taken over by Media Monitors). That timespan of ads was appropriate in the context of the ARC Project. Although the ads studied are now more than 10 years old, it could legitimately be maintained that current ads continue to demonstrate the same themes as shown in the analysis presented here. To test that proposition would require a repeat of the following methodology, focused on current ads. This paper details the methods and findings of the study of that earlier collection of ads, as a basis for potential comparison¹.

A list of over 600 ads, with basic information about manufacturer and model, time first broadcast, duration and a brief description, was provided by AdTrak and from these, three researchers selected a sample based on the following criteria; a variety of standard car types including sedans, hatchbacks, utes and work vehicles (trucks and motorbikes were excluded). The sample excluded ads not seen on free-to-air television and 'sale' ads. The sample represents a good cross section of the advertisers and vehicle types as tables 1 and 2 indicate. The list of ads requested was given to Adtrack who then provided a videotape of the ads. The video version was then made into mpegs so that they could be reviewed more easily on computer.

Coding process

In order to develop the analysis a number of coding criteria were established and discussed amongst three members of the team. A document was set up in Filemaker Pro in which the ads were to be described and coded. Final categories were established and coding by two of the researchers commenced. Coding was repeated according to the established categories by a research assistant who had not previously been involved in the project. The final process was not undertaken until 2006 due to a range of problems with the research project. The addition of a research assistant provided additional rigour to the process of coding the ads.

The coding spreadsheet contained the following categories:

Manufacturer

Model/manufacturer

¹ The costs of accessing the 2002–2003 advertisements were able to be borne under the ARC Project funding. Obtaining access to more recent advertisements would require additional, and considerable, funding.

Theme
No. of cars
Driver gender
No. of passengers
People outside car
Relation to other vehicles
Location
Nature of driving
Onscreen sound
Offscreen sound
Voiceover
Allusions to speed
Allusions to power
Manufacturer tagline
Model tagline
Description of ad
Analysis/comments
Mpeg file (ID)
Vehicle type

Analysis of codes

The next level of analysis, undertaken in 2010, involved developing codes within the data categories and determining frequencies within various categories such as number of cars in the ad, number of people in the vehicle, gender of drivers and locale or environment in which the ad was filmed. For the purpose of this paper the focus will be on these categories in order to illustrate some of the dominant themes forming the constants in this sample of ads. The main findings from the analysis will be reported followed by some discussion of the dominant image of driving derived from the analysis.

RESULTS

In this section the results of the coding and analysis derived from the following categories will be presented:

- Manufacturer
- Vehicle type – small, sedan, sports, ute, 4x4, wagon
- Number of cars in the ad
- Locale – urban road, carpark, urban other, coastal, rural, bush/outback, dealer showroom, race track
- Drivers, passengers and others – number and gender

Ads by manufacturer and vehicle type

The sample was a good representation of manufacturers as shown in Table 1 and vehicle types (Table 2). Twenty-five manufacturers were represented in the sample. The manufacturers with the highest number of ads in the sample were Holden, Toyota and Mitsubishi, followed by Ford, Honda, Mazda and Nissan. There were ads from 18 other manufacturers with between four and one ads each.

Table 1
Manufacturers in sample

Manufacturer	No. in sample	Manufacturer	No. in sample
Holden	13	Daihatsu	2
Toyota	13	Alfa	2
Mitsubishi	10	Mini	2
Ford	9	Lexus	1
Honda	9	Renault	1
Mazda	6	Mercedes	1
Nissan	5	Suzuki	1
Chrysler	4	Daewoo	1
Hyundai	4	Landrover	1
Saab	2	MG	1
VW	3	Volvo	1
Jaguar	2	Kia	1
BMW	2	Total	97

Ads by vehicle type

Vehicle types were fairly evenly distributed with the highest number of ads for small cars at 24 (25%), followed by sedans at 19 (20%), and sports cars and 4 x 4s at 18 (18.5%). Seven ads included various vehicles and nine showed utes. There were only two ads in which the vehicle was classified as 'family' and these were a Volvo XC90 and a Hyundai Sonata both presented with the man driving and wife and children in the car.

Table 2
Vehicle type

Type of Vehicle	No. in sample
Small	24
Sedan	19

Sports	18
4 x 4	18
Ute	9
Various	7
Family (wagon)	2
Total	97

Number of vehicles and driver by number and gender

The majority of ads (64%, n = 61) showed a single car, 13 (15%) showed 2-4 cars and 21 (22%) showed four cars or more. In one ad no cars appeared. (The ad with no car was a VW ad showing caterpillars munching on leaves and the tag line “No wonder everybody’s being bitten by the bug”). In 62 ads there are no passengers evident amounting to 64% of the ads. In 18 ads there was a male passenger, in 6 a female passenger and in 10 ads there were both male and female passengers. The majority depict a single car on the road and more than half the ads have only a single person evident.

The ads were analysed for gender of driver and it was found that in 41 (42%) ads there were only male drivers and in 8 there were only female drivers with 15 ads showing both male and female drivers and in 33 no driver was seen. In many of these a male driver was implied. Males are more than twice as likely to be depicted as the driver and even more likely when the scene is coastal/country/bush. While eight ads with female drivers were of urban scenes only five were coastal/country/bush. Males were more strongly associated with the open road in the sample.

Locale

An urban location usually has buildings, street signs, billboards, city lights and other streets, traffic lights or road signs visible or implied. Country location includes coastal, rural, bushland and outback scenes where there are wide open spaces and there is often an absence of other vehicles. Car parks are often used to illustrate precision and have been included in urban locales.

Table 3
Locale

Locale	n
Country	34
Urban	27
Various	21

Race track/street race	10
Studio/showroom/other	5
<hr/> Total	<hr/> 97

For locale, 27 ads were shot in urban locations including car parks and 34 in country/coastal/bush locations. Two of the ads displaying bush or outback scenes were rally driving scenes and ten ads included scenes on a race track or street racing while five included studio locations. The remaining 21 ads showed various scenes including both urban and country. The open road theme is reinforced in many ads with not only the single vehicle on the road but also in dramatic scenes such as coastal, country roads or bush roads where there are tight bends and rough terrain to challenge vehicle and driver.

Open road scenes were also depicted in urban locations with no other traffic on the roads. In 18 (66%) of the urban scenes only one car was evident and in 25 (73%) country or open road scenes there was only one vehicle depicted. In many of the ads with various vehicles in both urban and country contexts no other vehicles were evident and only the driver was visible.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that in this sample there is an evident preference for single vehicle ads with a single male driver. The image derived from the 2002–2003 advertisements could be regarded as a dominant symbolic image of driving that forms part of the cultural shaping of driving (Redshaw 2008; Steg 2004). The desire to express one's self through the vehicle has been linked to dangerous driving practices (M.ller 2004; Styles, Imberger & Catchpole 2004) and had become the overriding characteristic of the car evident in the dominant image in these car advertisements. Prosocial content has been demonstrated in a number of studies to increase prosocial behavior (Mares & Woodard 2007; Fischer, Vingilis et al. 2011). There are very few prosocial themes evident in this sample, and that absence is concerning as driving is an essentially social and cooperative activity. The absence of prosocial themes at the very least reinforces an idea that interaction with others is not an important consideration in driving.

The advertising dollar far outstrips campaigns by government to counteract the images presented of the car and the driver in advertising. The impact of car advertising needs to be considered as having a framing role, influencing social norms. The absence of everyday social factors in car advertising, including the dependencies and demands of normal life, traffic, social co-operation and responsibility in car advertising, needs to be

addressed. The emphasis on the skill of handling the car as the only real skill required of a driver as represented in advertising has to be counterbalanced by the need for skills in perception, planning and shared responsibility and awareness of the power and destructive ability of the car.

New ways of evaluating the impact of car advertising and of judging how driving is framed by advertising have been presented in this paper that can be used to demand more social responsibility from advertisers. Car advertising as well as campaign advertising needs to emphasise that driving is a social activity, only made possible by cooperation and that it requires more than skill in handling dramatic bends on open roads. It requires negotiation and concern for others, planning and attention to what is going on in the environment outside the comfort of the car. The ways in which the driver is promoted and reinforced in the media and through advertising, impacts on and influences young driver behaviour, needs to be considered in research.

Further research

More recent studies are needed that can capture a high quantity of on road advertising shown in peak times in capital cities across a limited time frame. Further research could examine more recent advertising using the codes outlined in this study and comparing them to the excitement/fun category used in Ferguson et al. (2003) and in Sheehan et al. (2006) to evaluate the effect of advertising codes in Australia. Prosocial content could be systematically identified in future research on car advertising and incorporated into codes of conduct for advertisers.

REFERENCES

- Barnett, E., & Casper, M. (2001). A definition of "social environment". *American Journal of Public Health, 91*(3).
- Donovan, R. J., Fielder, L. J., Ouschan, R., & Ewing, M. (2011). Self-regulation of motor vehicle advertising: Is it working in Australia? *Accident Analysis and Prevention, 43*(3), 631-636.
- Ferguson, S.A., Hardy, A.P., Williams, A F. 2003. Content analysis of television advertising for cars and minivans: 1983-1998. *Accident Analysis and Prevention, 35*: 825-831.
- Fischer, P., Kastenmüller, A., Greitemeyer, T., Vogrincic, C., & Sauer, A. (2011). The effects of risk-glorifying media exposure on risk-positive cognitions, emotions, and behaviors: a meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin 137*(3), 367-390.
- Fischer, P., Vingilis, E., Greitemeyer, T., & Vogrincic, C. (2011). Risk-taking and the media. *Risk Analysis, 31*(5), 699-705.

- Gardner, M., & Steinberg, L. (2005). Peer Influence on Risk Taking, Risk Preference, and Risky Decision Making in Adolescence and Adulthood: An Experimental Study. *Developmental Psychology, 41*(4), 625-635.
- Hatakka, M., Keskinen, E., Gregersen, N. P., Glad, A., & Hernetkoski, K. (2002). From control of the vehicle to personal self-control; broadening the perspectives to driver education. *Transportation Research Part F, 5*(3), 201-215.
- Mares, M. L., & Woodard, E. H. I. (2007). Positive effects of television on children's social interaction: A meta-analysis. *Media Psychology, 7*, 301-322.
- Møller, M. (2004). An explorative study of the relationship between lifestyle and driving behaviour among young drivers. *Accident Analysis and Prevention, 36*, 1081-1088.
- Peden, M., McKee, K., & Krug, E. E. (2002). Injury: A leading cause of the global burden of disease 2000. Geneva: World Health Organisation.
- Redshaw, S. (2006). Acceleration: The limits of speed. In H. a. L. McNaughton, Adam (Ed.), *The reinvention of everyday life: culture in the twenty-first century* (pp. 195-206). Christchurch: University of Canterbury Press.
- Redshaw, S. (2007). Articulations of the Car: the dominant articulations of racing and rally driving. *Mobilities, 2*(1), 121-141.
- Redshaw, S. (2008). *In the company of cars: driving as a social and cultural practice*. Aldershot: Ashgate Press.
- Redshaw, S. (2011). Dangerous safety: Extreme articulations in car advertising and implications for safety campaigns. *Journal of the Australasian College of Road Safety, 22*(4), 57-63.
- Redshaw, S., & Nicoll, F. (2010). Gambling drivers: regulating cultural technologies, subjects, spaces and practices of mobility. *Mobilities, 5*(3), 409 — 430.
- Schonfeld, C., Steinhardt, D., & Sheehan, M. (2005). *A content analysis of Australian motor vehicle advertising: effects of the 2002 voluntary code on restricting the use of unsafe driving themes*. Paper presented at the Australasian Road Safety Research, Policing and Education Conference, Wellington, New Zealand
- Schorman, R. (2010). This Astounding Car for \$1500: The Year automobile Advertising Came of Age. *Enterprise and Society, 11*(3), 468-523.
- Sheehan, M., Steinhardt, D., & Schonfeld, C. (2006). A Content Analysis of Australian Motor Vehicle Advertising (pp. 76). Canberra: Australian Transport Safety Bureau.
- Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2000). The City and the Car. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 24*(4), 737-757.
- Shin, P., Hallett, D., Chipman, M., Tator, C., & Granton, J. (2005). Unsafe driving in North American automobile commercials. *Journal of Public Health, 27*(4), 318-325.
- Shope, J. T. (2006). Influences on youthful driving behavior and their potential for guiding interventions to reduce crashes. *Injury Prevention, 12*(suppl 1), i9-i14.
- Shope, J. T., & Bingham, C. R. (2008). Teen Driving: Motor-Vehicle Crashes and Factors That Contribute. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 35*(3, Supplement), S261-S271.

- Sofoulis, Z., Noble, G., Redshaw, S., Morphet, A., & Finlay, A. (2005). *Youth, Media and Driving Messages*. Sydney: University of Western Sydney.
- Steg, L. (2004). Car use: lust and must. Instrumental, symbolic and affective motives for car use. *Transportation Research Part A* 39, 147–162.
- Styles, T., Imberger, K., & Catchpole, J. (2004). Learning to take risks: Understanding risk taking by young males in the ACT. Vermont South: ARRB Group.
- Taubman - Ben-Ari, O., & Katz - Ben-Ami, L. (2012). The contribution of family climate for road safety and social environment to the reported driving behavior of young drivers. *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 47(0), 1-10.
- Urry, J. (2004). The 'system' of automobility. 21(4), 25–39.
- Wilson, N., Maher, A., Thomson, G., & Keall, M. (2007). Smooth handling: The lack of safety-related consumer information in car advertisements. *Injury Prevention*, 13(5), 304-306.

Sarah Redshaw

As an ARC Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney, Dr Redshaw developed and conducted several research studies on the social and cultural aspects of young people's engagement with cars. She published a book *In the Company of Cars: driving as a social and cultural practice* (Ashgate 2008) and several journal articles from this work. She has since conducted a number of health-related projects including 'Bereavement Support in Community Nursing' with the University of Western Sydney and Heartbeats while working as Senior Researcher in the Kids Research Institute. Several publications have resulted from these studies. She is Research Fellow in Sociology, Macquarie University working with A/Professor Fine on projects and publications related to measuring outcomes in community care. She is also working with Dr Val Ingham from Charles Sturt University on a collaborative project on social vulnerabilities in the Blue Mountains.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study was conducted as part of an Australian Research Council Linkage Project Transforming Drivers 2003-2006. Dr Redshaw as the Postdoctoral Research Fellow on the project developed and conducted the analysis of the advertisements presented here. The analysis was not able to be conducted within the timeframe of the project. The assistance of Dr Selvaraj Velayutham made the final analysis possible.